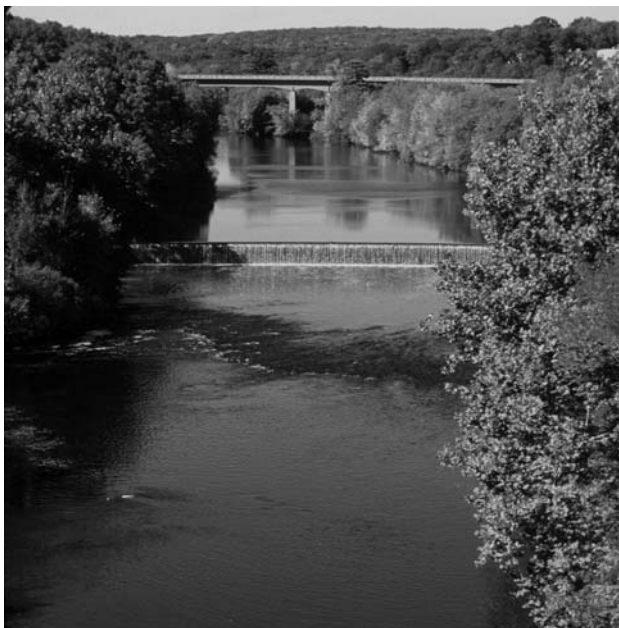




The Future of the National Heritage Areas in the National Park System

An Interim Report by the National Park System Advisory Board Partnerships Committee



The Future of National Heritage Areas

The Partnerships Committee has been charged to undertake a review of the National Heritage Area Program and make recommendations to the National Park System Advisory Board on its future direction and the appropriate role for the National Park Service.

Introduction

Heritage areas are an important direction in conservation and historic preservation, as demonstrated by the growing interest in national heritage areas in every region of the United States. Today, there are 27 congressionally designated heritage areas and corridors, and as many as 15 proposed national areas are being considered by Congress. Given the growing public and congressional interest in national heritage area designation, National Park Service Director Mainella asked the National Park System Advisory Board to look at the future of national heritage areas and their relationship to the National Park Service.

In March of 2004, the National Park System Advisory Board Partnerships Committee, chaired by Mayor Jerry Hruba, accepted its charge to undertake a review of the National Heritage Area Program.

At its first meeting, the committee identified three important questions for consideration:

- 1. How can a contemporary mission for the National Park Service be understood, supported, and fostered which goes beyond managing parks to include heritage conservation beyond park boundaries?*
- 2. What are the two-way benefits and responsibilities between National Heritage Areas and the National Park Service in its role as one of the National Heritage Areas' major partners? Why is it or isn't it important for the National Park Service to have an enduring yet evolving relationship with the National Heritage Areas?*
- 3. How can the National Park Service structure itself to work more effectively with National Heritage Areas?*

Members of the committee held three meetings—Cuyahoga Valley National Park (June 2004), John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (September 2004), and Cane River National Heritage Area / Cane River Creole National Historical Park (December 2004).

At each meeting the committee had the opportunity to hear presentations on the development of the heritage area movement; to visit heritage area projects; and most importantly, to hear firsthand from residents about the impact of the heritage area on their communities and larger region. The committee also reviewed the study underway to evaluate the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. The results of this evaluation, undertaken by the NPS Conservation Study Institute, have now been published as a technical assistance report titled *Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future*.

“Heritage areas are providing opportunities for people to continue to live within the landscape of the cultures where they grew up and to value the variety of those cultures...and to pass those connections on to everybody who comes.”

General Findings

National Heritage Areas are a powerful way for the diverse people of this nation to tell their stories with integrity and authenticity.

National Heritage Areas knit together the whole landscape and provide an integrated approach to conserving the cultural, natural and historic resources that define sense of place and shared heritage values.

National Heritage Areas offer the National Park Service and park units a new strategy to meet their stewardship mission by engaging the public outside of park boundaries while recognizing the people who live there.

National Heritage Areas reflect the evolution of concepts and thoughts of the American people regarding how to best conserve and make available for enjoyment of future generations revered and valued landscapes and cultures.

National Heritage Areas assist the National Park Service in building new constituencies and staying relevant by looking not just to the past or present, but also to the future.

The National Park Service is one of many heritage areas partners; however, the NPS has an important role as an expert, convener and catalyst. The NPS can also provide credibility, planning and interpretation expertise, and organizational capacity to emerging and designated heritage areas.

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas can play a major role in the heritage area movement and assist the National Park Service in administering the heritage area program as a component of the National Park System.

Actionable Findings

National Heritage Areas are founded on consensus-based planning, local commitments and a network of long-term partnerships. For this reason a long-term commitment is needed to achieve meaningful progress.

National Heritage Areas contribute to the mission of the National Park Service and they need a defined place in the National Park System, its policy framework and budget.

National Heritage Areas provide the people of the nation with outstanding opportunities for place-based education and a forum for civic engagement.

Each National Heritage Area is unique and needs legislative authority specifically tailored to meet the needs of its region and its resources.

Emerging and designated National Heritage Areas that work in close partnership with National Park Service units and programs benefit from the National Park Service's expertise and provide a stronger vehicle for Congress, reflecting grassroots efforts, to effectively utilize the National Park Service to achieve publicly supported conservation and preservation.

The National Heritage Area approach, with its complex but essential networks of relationships and ability to leverage resources for resource conservation and economic and community development, can serve as a model for achieving NPS conservation goals with multiple partners. The process, key elements, outcomes and impacts need to be identified and better understood.

“...in heritage areas...individual sites, whether units of the National Park System, state parks, or national register landmarks, become static reference points within a larger region that is undergoing change. Collectively, these reference points allow the heritage area to keep its history alive, by using these places as examples without being held back by them...”

Recommendations

1. Establish a legislative foundation for a system of National Heritage Areas in the National Park Service that includes the following concepts:

- a. Creates a system of National Heritage Areas as a component of the greater National Park System, but not as units of the National Park System.
- b. Requires a feasibility study to demonstrate that future proposed heritage areas meet the following criteria:
 - i. There is a nationally important story,
 - ii. The area's heritage resources contribute to telling the story,
 - iii. There is strong public interest and support, and
 - iv. There is the capacity for heritage area leadership and management.
- c. Sets standards for management planning that include a business plan and close coordination with the local community and ensure that the plan is reviewed and approved by the Secretary of the Interior in a timely way.
- d. Recognizes the two-way partnership between National Heritage Areas and adjacent or thematically related National Park units and authorizes technical and operational assistance as appropriate.
- e. Protects the rights of private property owners.
- f. Requires that for each congressionally designated heritage area, three years prior to cessation of federal funding authority, a study be conducted to recommend the appropriate level of future National Park Service involvement in that National Heritage Area, including, but not limited to future federal funding.

2. Develop the policy infrastructure including performance measures, and develop a process for partnership peer review of National Heritage Areas by practitioners in the National Park Service and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas, and prepare

well-documented budget requests.

3. Partner with the Alliance of National Heritage Areas to provide educational opportunities on partnership practices in heritage areas and outside park boundaries, and coordinate with partnership initiatives of the National Park Service Conservation Study Institute, National Park Service Partnership Office, the Four Cs Council, and the Director's Roundtable.
4. Share the lessons learned by the National Park Service in its role as listener and convener in National Heritage Areas with related National Park System Advisory Board initiatives on education and civic engagement.
5. Invest in research on National Heritage Areas to better understand the process of collaborative conservation and partnership networks, and to better evaluate the outcomes of designation and partnership on resource conservation and community and economic development over time.

The Partnerships Committee envisions a future for the National Heritage Areas in the National Park Service that is based on sound legislation; an expanded role for conservation stewardship of historic properties, significant landscapes and living cultures; a redefinition of how traditional cultures tell their story; a better understanding of partnership and heritage development; and the potential to develop a better understanding of place-based education and civic engagement to keep the work of the agency relevant in succeeding generations.

For more information, contact:
NPS National Heritage Areas
1201 Eye Street, NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

202 354-2221/2222 phone
202-371-6468 facsimile
www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/

Alliance of National Heritage Areas
John Cosgrove, Executive Director
anha.cosgrove@adelphia.net

202 528-7549 phone
866 546-6152 facsimile
www.nationalheritageareas.org



**National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior**

National Heritage Areas
1201 Eye Street, NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

202 354-2221/2222 phone
202 371-6468 facsimile
www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/

**Members of the National Park System
Advisory Board Partnerships Committee:**

Hon. Jerry N. Hruby, Chair
Advisory Board Member; Mayor of Brecksville, OH
Mr. William Walters
Advisory Board Member; National Park Service (Retired)

Honorable Clarene Law
Wyoming House District 23
Mr. Herman Agoyo
San Juan Pueblo Realty Officer
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National Park Foundation
Mr. Edward Sanderson
National Council of State Historic Preservation Officers
Ms. Marie Rust
Regional Director, Northeast
Mr. Jon Jarvis
Regional Director, Pacific West
Mr. John Debo
Superintendent, Cuyahoga Valley National Park
Ms. Barbara Goodman
Superintendent, Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve
Mr. John Cosgrove
Executive Director, Alliance of National Heritage Areas
Mr. August R. Carlino
President and CEO, Steel Industry Heritage Corporation
Mr. Daniel M. Rice
President and CEO, Ohio and Erie Canal Corridor Coalition

Special Thanks To:

Ms. Nora Mitchell
Mr. Rolf Diamant
Mr. Michael Creasey
Mr. Loran Fraser
Ms. Delia Clark
Ms. Brenda Barrett
Ms. Suzanne Copping

Meetings Graciously Hosted by:

Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor
Massachusetts and Rhode Island, September 2004
Cane River National Heritage Area
Louisiana, December 2004
MotorCities National Heritage Area
Michigan, April 2005

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